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978-1-107-62162-6 - Cambridge County Geographies: Wiltshire

By A. G. Bradley

Excerpt

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i. County and Shire. Meaning of the Words.

If we take a map of England and contrast it with a map of the United States, perhaps one of the first things we shall notice is the dissimilarity of the arbitrary divisions of land of which the countries are composed. In America the rigidly straight boundaries and rectangular shape of the majority of the States strike the eye at once; in England our wonder is rather how the boundaries have come to be so tortuous and complicated—to such a degree, indeed, that until recently many counties had outlying islands, as it were, within their neighbours' territory. We may guess at once that the conditions under which the divisions arose cannot have been the same, and that while in America these formal square blocks of land, like vast allotment gardens, were probably the creation of a central authority, and portioned off much about the same time; the divisions we find in England own no such simple origin. Our guess would not have been wrong, for such, in fact, is more or less the case. The formation of the English counties in many instances was (and is—for they have altered up to to-day) an affair of slow growth.

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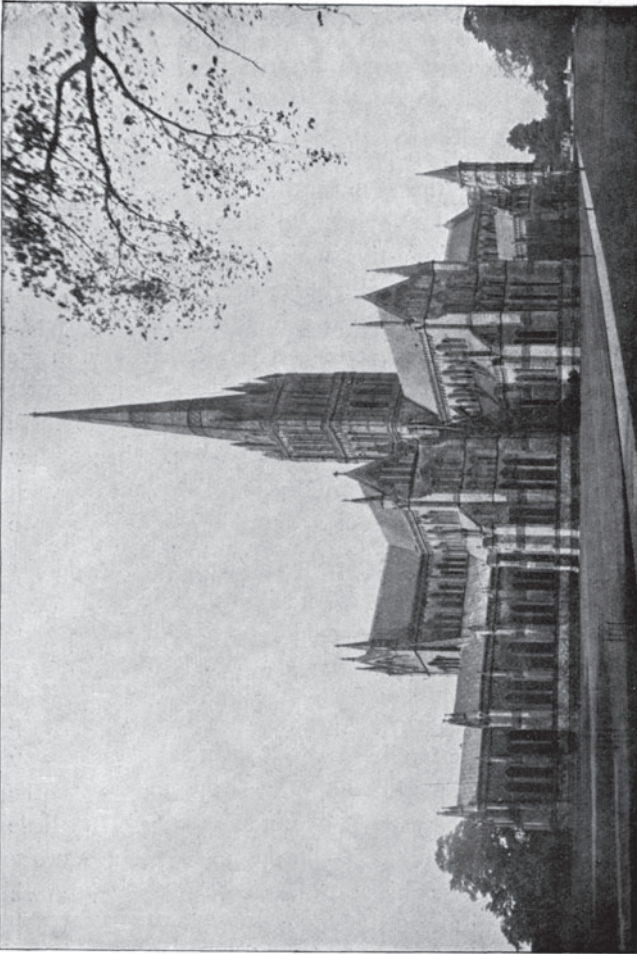
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King Alfred is credited with having made them, but inaccurately, for some existed before his time, others not till long after his death, and their origin was—as their names tell us—of very diverse nature.

Let us turn once more to our map of England. Collectively, we call all our divisions counties, but not every one of them is accurately thus described. Cornwall, for example, is not. Some have names complete in themselves, such as Kent and Sussex, and we find these to be old English kingdoms with but little alteration either in their boundaries or their names. To others the terminal *shire* is appended, which tells us that they were *shorn* from a larger domain—*shares* of Mercia or Northumbria or some other of the great English kingdoms. The term county is of Norman introduction,—the domain of a *Comte* or Count.

Wiltshire, in Saxon times the clan country of the Wilsoetas, became one of the counties of the Saxon kingdom of Wessex, and had for its capital the town of Wilton, which though now of small size and importance was the capital of Wessex when Alfred the Great was its king. To go further back, Wilton was named from the river Wily on whose banks it stands, Wily-town and so Wil-ton. The boundaries of Wiltshire are almost the same to-day as they were in the eighth century and in the later time of King Alfred, when together with Berkshire it formed the most easterly portion of Wessex, which for some time was the dominant Saxon kingdom and to a certain extent exercised sway over the others.

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Salisbury Cathedral from the N.E.

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2. General Characteristics. Position and Natural Conditions.

Wiltshire is almost entirely an agricultural and pastoral county. It is not so prominent among English counties as it was before the eighteenth century. This is due to many causes, but chiefly to that immense growth of manufacturing industries which has so greatly changed the character of England, and to a certain extent even that of its people, in the last hundred and fifty years. The greatest development in this respect has been in the Midlands and in the North, where coal and iron are most plentiful, and in certain maritime counties near to these that have also the advantage of sea ports, whence they can not only ship their manufactures abroad but import the material, such as wool and cotton, from which to make them. This immense increase in wealth and population has also caused the transformation of vast tracts of country, once moor, marshland, or wild forest, into fertile farming countries. Many towns too in the South, more especially London, as well as many districts, have for various reasons, easy enough to give if it were necessary, shared to the full in this great development. Every county has of course progressed more or less with the times. But by comparison some have changed very little and remained agricultural counties, which in a country like England whose chief national wealth is now in trade and manufactures means taking a secondary rank. Wiltshire is one of such counties. This falling away in

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Marlborough, from Granham Hill

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importance is no reproach to Wiltshire or its people. It is due merely to its situation as an inland county without coal or iron to speak of, and to its being too far from London for the huge population of that city to spread their residences and wealth about it as they have over great parts of Essex, Herts, Kent, Surrey, Sussex and even Berkshire. Some people think it an advantage to a county not to be smirched with the smoke of factories, nor cut up into villa residences, nor sprinkled with towns of monotonously-built terraces and streets where people live packed together and repair in a body by train to a big city at a distance every day to earn a livelihood.

No county represents Old England without its many disadvantages more thoroughly than Wiltshire does to-day. Save for a few local industries and one great railroad depot it is agricultural and pastoral from end to end. It is not good from any point of view that England should be one vast workshop unable to feed more than a dwindling fraction of its people. Agriculture is still the cleanest and finest of all pursuits and breeds the best men. That Wiltshire from its suitability for every form of rural industry and country pursuits once held high place, and is now of comparatively small importance in wealth and population because nature has ordained that it shall hold to the oldest and finest of industries, is not a matter for regret. It may even be something to be thankful for. At any rate we only mention this changed position of Wiltshire here as an interesting fact.

Another thing, perhaps, has altered its comparative position still more. Between the fourteenth and the

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eighteenth centuries and before the rise of the great Northern manufacturing towns, portions of Wiltshire were the principal seat of the English cloth trade, originally introduced there, as it was into Norfolk and other districts, by the Flemings. This was a small and homely business compared to the huge factories which



Bremhill Church

now chiefly monopolise it and which practically killed (though a little still survives) the Wiltshire trade early in the nineteenth century. Still it was important having regard to the small population of England at that period. It kept many towns that we now consider small but which then ranked high as busy and prosperous,

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and it flourished in Wiltshire because of the great numbers of sheep which were fed on its downs and on the Cotswold hills upon its northern boundary. There were no convenient means of inland transport in those days, neither railroads nor canals, while the high roads were mere tracks, almost impassable in winter and rough and rutty in summer, so that a manufacturer had to plant his business in the district where his material was grown. Wool is now imported from every part of the world and is manufactured on a vast scale by elaborate machinery driven by coal. The fleeces of a single English county like Wiltshire (no longer preeminent even in wool owing to the immense reclamation of once almost worthless lands in other districts) are but an insignificant item in clothing the millions of people at home and abroad that the British manufacturer now clothes. Yet more, the whole wool crop of Britain is but a small portion of that demanded by the great factories of the North. In former days when Wiltshire was a leading wool-producing county British wool not merely clothed the people of England, but so much was sent abroad to foreign manufactures as to constitute a leading source of the wealth of our English people. From this it will be readily understood why the position of Wiltshire among the forty-four English counties has so vastly altered. There are now several towns in Lancashire containing more people than the whole of Wiltshire. In the middle ages and for long afterwards Lancashire was a thinly populated, backward, almost barbarous country compared to Wiltshire, which stood very high not only

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as an agricultural and manufacturing county, but as a favourite residence and hunting ground of kings, great nobles, and wealthy gentry. There was no desire then among such people to be near London ; it did not mean anything to them. It was rather an advantage, too, not



The Market Place, Devizes

to be on the sea coast, which was always troubled by pirates and buccaneers. Above all, more than half of Wiltshire was clean dry pasture land, not merely good for grazing and easy to cultivate when required, but easy and pleasant to move about on at a time when the lower parts of England were greatly obstructed by forests, thickets,

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undrained or half-drained marshes, and when much of the uplands not chalk were wet moors, which they sometimes are still, or hills clad like much of the lowland with tangled wood and bushes. Other counties in the South have considerable areas like the Wiltshire downs, but no other county has its greater half thus composed. So Wiltshire stands preeminently for the county of chalk downs, so much so that many strangers think of it as nothing else. At any rate any one who is able to picture the England of all periods before the great civil war of 1642–5 and who knows Wiltshire, can easily understand why it was till then and for long afterwards so important agriculturally and considered so particularly favourable a county to live in. It is difficult for people of our time, accustomed only to the beautifully-kept appearance of modern England, to realise how rough, wet, and tangled a country most of it was in the middle ages. More than half of Wiltshire, however, was then, as a good deal of it still is, short down turf, or open unobstructed country with little or no wood. This was much more prized by people in those and earlier times than it is now, when nearly the whole of England is, by comparison to the past, as clean as a garden. It was a still more valuable feature in the time of the Ancient Britons, when Britain generally was far rougher and more impassable than even in the middle ages and with its forests yet more infested with wild beasts. The Wiltshire downs were then very much what they are now and were in consequence the most populous part of England, a curious contrast to the present day, when they are among the least populous.